

# A Park Next Door

Urban state parks provide outdoor recreation and scenic beauty for city dwellers throughout Montana

The mention of “Montana parks” may conjure images of Flathead Lake’s sparkling blue waters, Bannack’s ghostly main street, or the eerie rock formations inside Lewis and Clark Caverns. But it probably doesn’t call to mind an urban park, a place where a city dweller can paddle a canoe, take a stroll, look at birds, fly a model airplane, practice fly-casting, or take a swim. Urban parks are generally associated with major cities, like New York City’s Central Park, not places you’d find here where the buffalo roam.

Yet even wild and woolly Montana has state parks in or near urban areas. The facilities are increasingly important as parts of Big Sky Country become more urbanized. As in other cities across the country, Montana’s urban state parks provide places where

residents can learn about local history and wildlife, hold family reunions and weddings, throw company picnics, stage sporting events, and more. “For many Montanans, urban parks have become an essential contribution to their quality of life,” says Joe Maurier, Parks Division chief for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

## Wild in the city

A sign on 24th Avenue in Billings shows the temperature at 92 degrees as I leave a deli carrying curried chicken sandwiches for me and my wife, who is waiting in the hot car. Our golden retriever, Zelda, is panting in the back seat. In under 20 minutes we’re sitting in the shade of trees on the shore of Lake Elmo, still within the Billings city limits. A breeze carries the laughter and shouts of kids splashing and

**BY SAM CURTIS**



CANOING AT FRENCHTOWN POND STATE PARK BY DEA VOGEL

swimming from the sandy beach across the lake. Two anglers drift past in their small boat. After finishing our sandwiches, we take Zelda into the fenced “dog park” area, where she plays off leash and even takes a cooling swim.

**Lake Elmo State Park’s** 126 acres are divided in half between land and water, offering a variety of recreational opportunities. A jogging and hiking trail rings the scenic lake, which FWP stocks with trout. The department also maintains the swimming beach and a playground. “And it’s a great place to watch wildlife,” says park manager Terri Walters. “Even though the park is surrounded by homes, people see ospreys, loons, pheasants, and deer—not to mention all types of songbirds and warblers.”

Lake Elmo’s visitors are predominantly locals, numbering up to 1,000 or more on hot summer weekends. “Our group pavilion is usually booked solid throughout the summer with reunions, company parties, and weddings,” Walters says. “This is truly an urban park. It lets you get into a natural setting quickly, without having to travel too far

*Sam Curtis is a freelance writer in Bozeman.*

or spend a lot of money on gas.”

Great Falls residents can quickly reach **Giant Springs State Park**, just 4 miles from downtown. During the summer, primarily out-of-towners flock to the park’s huge, natural spring, gushing water out of the earth at an astounding rate of 156 million gallons a day. “But nine months of the year most visitors are locals, many of them using trails in and around the park for walking, wildlife watching, biking, running, and in-line skating,” says park manager Matthew Marcinek. “Many are regulars, people who come and park their car in the same place and take the same walk every day. A couple of times a week, I see the same lady wheelchairing with her dog along one 6-mile stretch of trail.”

Trails within the state park are part of the larger 30-mile River’s Edge Trail System that forms a well-used route from downtown Great Falls along the Missouri River to a wild, prairie landscape that extends for several miles downstream of the park. “It’s such a scenic, beautiful area along the river,” says Doug Wicks, president of Recreational Trails, Inc., a nonprofit group that helps maintain, improve, and extend the trail sys-

tem. “We get people coming to hike with the grandkids, see the change of seasons, enjoy the solitude, take a walk, or just park and look at birds.”

Bird watching is one of the great features of every Montana urban state park. On this early summer day at **Spring Meadow Lake**, on the outskirts of Helena, a cacophony of bird calls surrounds me as I amble along a trail winding through willows and red-osier dogwood that ring the spring-fed lake. I listen to the distinctive song of a killdeer and then see a yellow warbler flit among the leaves of a tree. Red-winged blackbirds fly to and from cattails in a nearby wetland, and great blue herons stalk the lake shallows in search of minnows. In this wild, green oasis, it’s difficult to believe that the traffic and fast-food stores of Euclid Avenue are just a few blocks away. “It’s quite a remarkable place,” says Helena resident and bird expert George Holton, who has been visiting the site for half a century. “When I first came out here in the 1950s, it was just a gravel pit. But the recuperative power of nature is wonderful. What a beautiful park it is now. The state did a great job when it bought this property.”

“We get people coming to hike with the grandkids, see the change of seasons, enjoy the solitude, take a walk, or just park and look at birds.”

The 56-acre site was originally a source of gravel used to rebuild Helena after a major fire devastated the downtown in 1928. When the gravel ran out, the mining operation closed down and the excavated areas filled with cold spring water. The landowner, who originally planned to develop the site for condominiums, sold it to the state in 1981. Now kids walk or cycle to the park from town to cool off in the lake or cast a line. “The fishing is really good, and that’s a big draw for these urban parks,” says park manager Craig Marr. “There are naturally reproducing largemouth bass in here, plus sunfish and perch, and we stock it each spring with rainbow trout.”

Soon kids will have additional opportuni-

ties to learn about nature. Next to the state park sits FWP’s Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, housed in the Stedman Foundry building, where orphaned bears are cared for before being returned to their natural habitats. At the historic building, FWP is developing a state-of-the-art wildlife education center that will contain wildlife exhibits, fish aquariums, and an outdoor amphitheater.

As Marr and I stroll along the trail, we pass a woman walking briskly in the other direction; we pass her again on the other side of the lake. “A lot of adults come here to get exercise in a natural setting, without leaving the city,” Marr says. “But kids—they’d rather look for frogs and turtles.”

#### Fond of their pond

Another converted gravel pit is **Frenchtown Pond State Park**, off I-90 about 15 miles northwest of Missoula. Frenchtown Pond typifies the diversity of recreational opportunities available at Montana’s urban state parks. “We get a lot of moms with their little ones splashing in the water and enjoying the playground equipment,” says Lee Bastian, regional park manager in Missoula.

**SUMMER IN THE CITY** Just because there are no skyscrapers doesn’t mean these state parks aren’t urban. Counterclockwise from upper left: Heading to a swimming hole at Spring Meadow Lake in Helena; fishing for trout at Lake Elmo in Billings; cycling over the world-famous spring at Giant Springs in Great Falls; kayak practice at Frenchtown Pond near Missoula.



CAROL POUICH



SHARISPHOTO.COM



CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

“It’s a safe place for them to go and not have to worry about the facility being too primitive or too far out in the woods.”

A great place for kids to learn to fish, the pond is used by FWP for its annual Family Fishing Initiative Program. “We draw 3,000 kids to Frenchtown with that one program,” Bastian says. “Kids catch their first little fish, and they’re beaming from ear to ear. Some nice 3-pound bass are there, too.”

Local sporting goods stores hold canoe and kayak demonstrations at the 20-acre spring-fed pond, and high school cross-country teams practice on the shoreline trail. On most summer weekends, members of church and civic organizations pack the group picnic shelters. The Big Sky Thunderbirds, a radio-controlled model airplane club, convenes a big event at the state park each year. U.S. Forest Service smoke-jumpers from Missoula train for water landings on the pond, and the annual Garden City Triathlon is held there each September. Bastian says the new park trail at Frenchtown Pond ties into AJ Memorial Trail, which residents created to link the park to the town of Frenchtown. “People want to make this a community park, an asset to their neighborhood,” he says.

#### Community amenity

All state parks have their fans, but urban state parks seem to have the strongest devotees. According to Ken Soderberg, chief of the Parks Division’s Interpretation Bureau, communities with a state park “take a lot of pride in that amenity,” he says. “The park becomes part of the community’s identity.”

It also becomes an urban asset. According to the nonprofit Urban Institute, parks increase nearby property values, improve public health by providing places to exercise, and introduce kids to civic organizations that sponsor recreational activities.

In Montana, it’s not always obvious what is or isn’t an urban state park. For instance, **Makoshika State Park** might seem to be in the middle of nowhere, yet its visitor center is



**CITY ESCAPE** Makoshika State Park in eastern Montana is considered an urban state park because it is partly within the Glendive city limits. Local families visit to learn about geology and dinosaurs, have a picnic, or take a bike ride on the park’s quiet paved roads.

within the Glendive city limits, and some families live just a quarter mile away. “Residents in and around Glendive treasure this place as ‘their’ local park,” says state park manager Ryan Sokoloski. “People walk into the park from town, or families bring their bikes and ride around, taking advantage of the paved roads, slow traffic, and beautiful scenery.” The park holds community concerts in its natural amphitheater, and in summer the local Lutheran Church holds Sunday services there. Most weekends the amphitheater is reserved for weddings or family reunions. “If anything

“ Families bring their bikes and ride around, taking advantage of the paved roads, slow traffic, and beautiful scenery.”

were to threaten this park, the people around here would be very upset,” says Sokoloski.

Not everyone appreciates Montana’s urban parks. “One of the challenges we constantly face is vandalism and inappropriate behavior,” says John Little, regional parks manager in Miles City. Replacing shot-up signs and latrine doors eats away at a park’s maintenance budget, and rowdy behavior scares away families. That was the situation at **Pirogue Island State Park**, a 300-acre island in the Yellowstone River near Miles City sep-

arated from the mainland by a channel. “We used to let people drive across to the island, but hooliganism became a problem,” Little says. After FWP closed the island to vehicles, problems declined. “We got some complaints at first from people who’d grown used to driving there,” Little says. “But some of them have since thanked us for creating a nice place for people to take walks, have picnics, and pick chokecherries.”

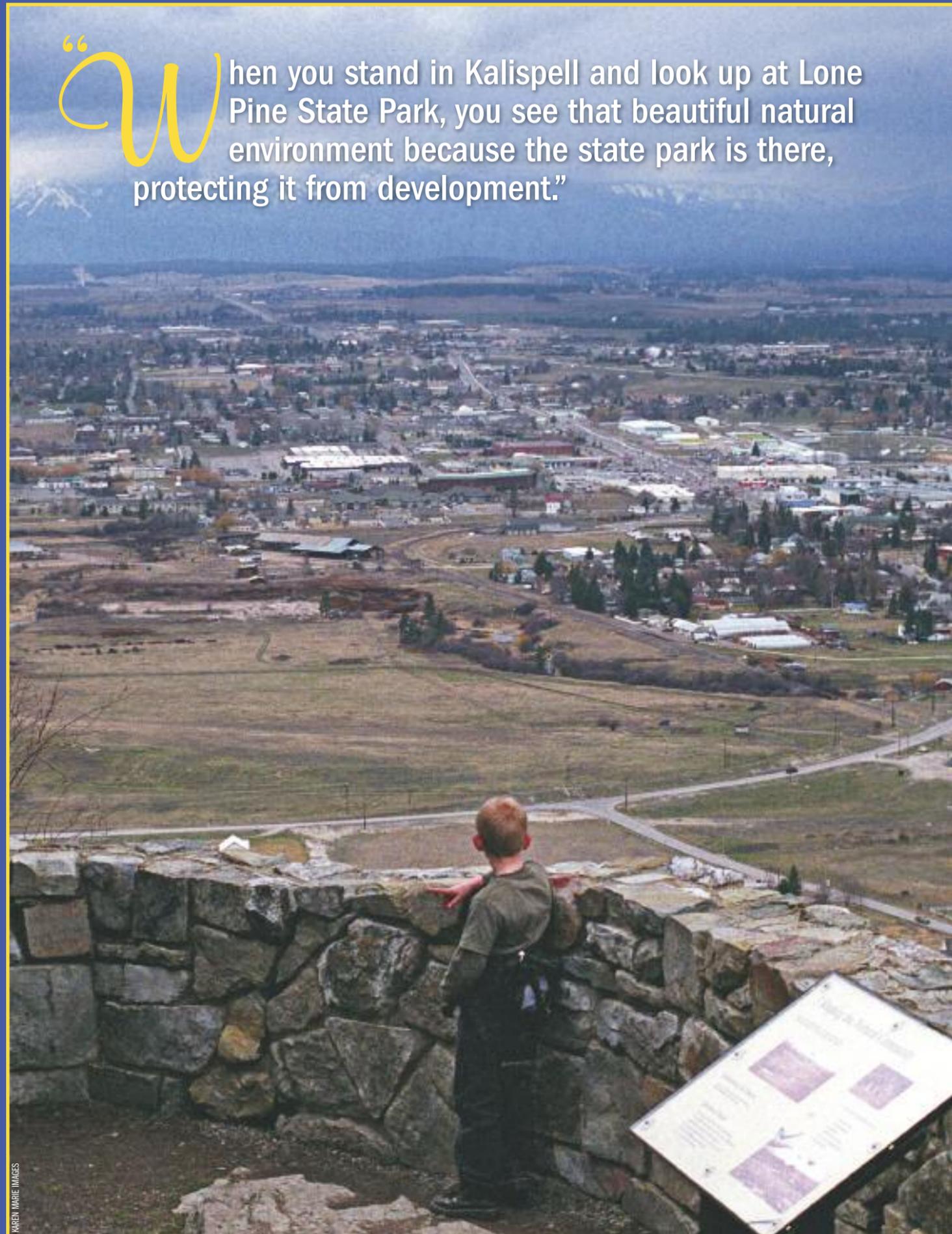
With its big skies and counties the size of some European countries, Montana wouldn’t seem like a state lacking in places to

enjoy the outdoors. But a growing and increasingly urbanized population is changing that, especially in popular areas like the Flathead Valley. “As our population centers grow, having these urban parks where people have access to diverse recreational opportunities becomes more and more important,” says Marty Watkins, recently retired regional park manager in Kalispell. She points out that **Whitefish Lake State Park**, though just 11 acres, offers one of only two public access sites on scenic Whitefish Lake, located on the outskirts of Whitefish. And **Lone Pine State Park**, which sits on a mountain overlooking Kalispell, has value not just as a place to visit, but as a place to view from afar. “When you stand in Kalispell and look up at Lone Pine State Park, you see that beautiful natural environment because the state park is there, protecting it from development,” Watkins says. “The park provides benefits beyond being a place where people can hike on a trail system in a natural setting, or where school kids can learn about their regional environment.”

Like other urban parks, Lone Pine not only provides essential outdoor recreational facilities and opportunities for people living nearby, it also adds beauty to the surrounding landscape. Whether they live in New York City or the city of Kalispell, that’s something all urban dwellers can appreciate. 🐾

*For more information on Montana’s state parks, both urban and rural, visit the FWP website at [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov).*

“When you stand in Kalispell and look up at Lone Pine State Park, you see that beautiful natural environment because the state park is there, protecting it from development.”



KAREN MARE IMAGES